

FROM HARMONY OF CONTRARIES TO INDEFINITE VIRTUALITY: FRAMING WORLD RATIONALITY

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Abstract. In my presentation, I will argue about world rationality from the perspective of its significance in the main periods of European thought. These paradigms of thought are still present in various shapes, with significant consequences on understanding the world, both at the level of macrocosm and microcosm. A series of explanations for the existence in this world, between rationality about *the harmony of opposites* and one to indefinite *virtuality*, is provided by Heraclitus and the Church Fathers. The paradigms justifying the world's rationality can play the role of critical scientific presuppositions in the research of the universe and of man. Following these considerations, I will discuss Maximus the Confessor's perspective on spiritual perception and Gregory Palamas' understanding of the sense's role in spiritual perception and their relevance in understanding man and the universe.

Nowadays, mainly due to the new perspectives traced out by research in Quantum Physics, it is not only scientists who have started to reconsider the nature of the relationship between humans and the universe. It has become apparent that one can no longer start from the hypothesis of humans' principled passivity toward how the universe exists. If, one way or another, one admits the possibility of a sort of human influence on the structures of the world, or to be more precise, on detectable and assessable behaviors of what we call the world as exteriority in comparison with us, we must reconsider how we understand humans and the universe. This need is not imposed by theoretical speculation but by *evidence*, by the concrete outcome of fundamental research. Although there are various discussions, disagreements, and interpretations of the outcome of fundamental research, one cannot deny that exceptional discoveries in Quantum Physics, which marked a large part of the 20th century, require a change of perspective on how the nature of the universe is understood. Therefore, one cannot skip another question: How can we know, based on the proper faculties, what is *truly* real? Furthermore, another question emerges, which is even more radical: to what extent does this act of knowledge and, in general, our interaction with the world impact it? We do not refer here to external, quantitative effects, to the processing and manipulation

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of matter and energy, but to action at the level of ultimate structures, to the universe's essential mode of being and presenting itself, to how the world *is*.

This question seems too daring, if not strange. However, we must reassert that the grounds of such a question are connected to concrete data provided by research and not by theoretical speculation. Of course, philosophy is well known to have caused, more than almost three centuries ago, a discussion on the nature of knowledge that led to the rationalism–empiricism debate. Yet another perspective is involved, which does not proceed from the need to meet theoretical requirements and offer support for a particular philosophical doctrine. Even though in modern philosophy, we find ideas that seem to come close to those implied in contemporary fundamental research, there is a very important difference in perspective.

To understand this difference, we must start from the context in which certain statements are made or specific ideas are argued. Undoubtedly, philosophical hermeneutics has imposed this consciousness by rejecting the leveling and non-critical vision supported by the type of understanding of the history of the human spirit as presented in textbooks before the mid-20th century. The lack of hermeneutic consciousness has radically deformed the understanding of the history of ideas, especially in Europe. This is why, when we find similarities in how dicta from different ages are formulated, we must be cautious and ask ourselves if they refer to the same thing.

Although the involvement of scientific ideology in the interpretation of the results of fundamental research has been denied, philosophical hermeneutics has made it clear that there is a *pre-scientific* dimension that cannot be neglected when the orientation of scientific research, as well as how its results are capitalized on, are evaluated. *Language* is the obvious pre-scientific dimension that creates the frameworks in which the capacities of scientific discourse unfold. With their specific nuances and how they have actualized and crystallized the practice of human communities, languages have lent a particular semantic charge to words. Significations in a specific language also represent the path along which the frameworks of human knowledge are articulated to the extent that this knowledge needs to receive a formulation, a linguistic articulation. Yet language appears as geological strata or rings in a tree trunk, and it simultaneously preserves several horizons for a word's formation or re-signification. However radical the most recent science would wish to be, it cannot ignore this fact. Such a radical discourse that would bracket the data of natural languages cannot be built, even though one were to use a highly formalized mode of signification. However, this must not be considered a principled limit imposed on knowledge by historicity and the relativity of natural languages. The evolutionist vision couches, nevertheless, a reductionism that one is too little aware of, for it has eliminated all that does not fit the perspective it upholds from previous episodes of history. Many data on the history of culture and civilization were skipped

because they had not been considered significant for the evolution of humanity towards the peak of history, namely modern culture. The elimination of this interpretation paradigm proves to have very productive consequences for the explanatory needs of current fundamental science. A careful review of our sources from more distant ages points to diverse and nuanced preoccupations to understand the nature of reality, which also tests the awareness of the difficulty of acceding to genuine knowledge of the rationality under which the world stands.

For the Greeks, *philosophia* was a radical ontological attitude, as its practice did not aim to achieve mere theoretical knowledge but also knowledge of the most concrete effects on the one who acquired it. For the Greeks, *Theorein* has the meaning of *contemplation*, an act as practical as possible from the point of view of both the path and the purpose envisioned. Therefore, for any philosopher from Antiquity, *theoretical thinking* is a phrase whose meaning differs significantly from ours. The same holds true for the meaning of science. The subsequent destiny of philosophy on its way to metaphysics steered away from this original meaning. As philosophy stopped to be understood first as love and as starting from love, as it straightforwardly claims knowledge that it stores as in a thesaurus, it contradicts not only its original determination but runs away from the truth, which it gives away in exchange for the bowl of lentils of the science of objects. It is known that little by little, in an obstinate and then accelerated and unstoppable evolution, philosophy ended by giving up its first name, “love of wisdom,” for the name of metaphysics.

The Greeks did not conceive of the possibility of knowing outside an act of inner reorientation, allowing access to a truth that appears as another degree of reality. As Heidegger warns us, in Greek, the truth – *aletheia* - must be understood as an *exit from hiding*, a *state of unhiddenness* that has various degrees. The truth is what is obtained by ensuring accessibility, in its visible form (*eidōs*), of that which appears and makes visible this something which appears, namely the *idea*. What Plato means by *idea* has no connection with the modern understanding of the concept of *idea* as a product of thought. This brings about presencing, specifically the presence of what a being is in any given instance. These clarifications by Heidegger open a different possibility to understand the purposes of the act of knowledge with Plato and, more importantly, the description of the nature of reality and the human ability to gain access to its knowledge. In recent studies, researchers seriously considered this model of the process and aim of knowledge. This comes from necessities dictated by the assessment of results from highly advanced science.

Roger Penrose’s book, *The Road to Reality: A Complete Guide to the Laws of the Universe*, offers an example. He authorized the “twistor” theory and formulated the “Penrose transformation.” In this book, Penrose analyzes the implications of Plato’s remarks, stating that the mathematical notions and propositions they intervene in do not have an exact correspondence in physics.

These notions, or, according to Heidegger, *aspects (ideas)*, have an autonomous existence in a world of mathematic forms. To declare that a mathematical statement has an autonomous, proto-type-like existence means to state that it is true in an *objective meaning*. Penrose asks: “What is reality?” and “What does it mean to understand?” rejecting the naïve belief that we deal with absolute and definite knowledge. Science proposes only increasingly perfect models that approximate what we call reality. Roger Penrose’s “What is reality?” answer is especially important. One must consider three universes: the mental universe, Plato’s mathematical universe, and the physical universe. The author considers that the connection between these Universes stands under the sign of mystery. Yet he carefully analyses the specificity of these connections and the proper difference for each of the three connections between these worlds. The outcome of this analysis is that an unavoidable *reality* of mathematical concepts must be acknowledged, although this reality cannot be identified with physical reality. These statements are relevant because they come from someone who does not plunge into speculations. Scientific rigor in highly advanced research now accepts expressions and perspectives that used to be rejected as short of what modern classicism understood by precision and specialized language.

Suppose we are to understand the preoccupation of the Greeks for the authenticity of the cognitive act when reality acquires a meaning that is not only different from description via the category of the substance which took the form of modernity’s physicochemical ideology but also has the complexity of some levels. In that case, we must carefully study how their thoughts emerge. A privileged opportunity is the survey of the emergence and evolution of the terms in which philosophical reflection was articulated.

Logos is a concept that can be seen as the arch stone in the architecture of Greek thought. There is a vast amount of literature on this term’s signification, yet many times, there was an underlying presupposition that it has a clear and definite meaning. The use of *logos* became commonplace in modern literature and not only in philosophical writing. We have become accustomed to using it in the most diverse contexts when describing an act or a situation that proves what we want to demonstrate. Yet, unawares, we have also transferred this understanding to those who used this essentially Greek term in the first horizon of philosophical thought, considering that nothing genuinely significant could exist in its original expressions. Heidegger warned us that this is not the case, and he proved it forcefully by analyzing several terms that did not seem to have anything left uncovered in their signification, not only the spectacular interpretation the German philosopher gave to Aristotle’s *physis*.

The genuinely exceptional situation of the term comes with Heraclitus. Heraclitus' philosophy openly admits that it starts with *logos*, expressing what pertains to them. The interpretation of Heraclitus' dicta on the logos is far from being exhausted, and it represents, maybe, one of the most serious challenges posed to us by the system of thought of antiquity. Modern attempts to frame Heraclitus' central statements within the canons of metaphysics or the scientific model justified by the philosophy of nature have proven increasingly insufficient. What, for metaphysics, was explained by the lack of a pre-Socratic distinction that would have indicated immature thought, namely the one between matter and spirit, proves now to be worthy of very serious reassessment. Even from a Christian point of view, as Michel Henry warns, the body–soul distinction, for instance, is rightfully improper. Heraclitus' *Logos* is not just the *logos* of the *kosmos* (a concept that gained a special signification in Heraclitus' description) but also of the human being; it is not just divine (or spiritual, in metaphysical terms) but also concrete, material. Heraclitus does not claim any philosophical affiliation or wish to create one. This is so because the only affiliation he admitted was pursuing the exigency of the *logos*. This exigency is not only accessible to humans but also a duty for them. Yet, putting this into words is not easy. As he was fully aware of this difficulty, Heraclitus' writings are metaphoric and emphatic. *Logos* cannot be easily expressed. Heraclitus' obscurity springs from the difficulty of expressing verbally an intuition that language cannot grasp. The great innovation of Heraclitus' thought is the topic of the hidden harmony of opposed forces and genuine justice, i.e., the profound unity that seeming oppositions hide and translate contraries are aspects of the same reality, which are necessarily involved so well that reality is one. All share *Logos*, and for humans, this common thing is intelligence or understanding. This statement must be understood to mean that we always must stay close to that which is common; it refers to this force, partly material, partly spiritual, which makes rational order possible. In any case, Heraclitus states that *logos* is more profound in human matters and escapes material uncovering: its action uncovers a status that goes beyond mere physical force, beyond a principle of nature or human reason, thus lending it a divine character. Here is a key aspect that will constantly challenge subsequent philosophers: when John the Evangelist identifies the embodied, crucified, and resurrected Jesus with the *Logos*, from a conceptual point of view, such identification was intelligible. Some interpreters saw Heraclitus' doctrine on the *Logos* as the crisscross of Philosophy, Physics, and Mysticism.

When John the Evangelist identified the Trinitarian Person of the *Son* with *Logos*, this identification represented a challenge to the mentality of late Hellenism. Although there was a certain closeness between *Logos* and a particular understanding of Divinity, for the Greeks, as they

had learned from Parmenides, it was unconceivable for Being to have anything to do with the sensitive, especially under this incomprehensible embodiment. Nor could the Jews accept an identification of Jesus, who lived as a human being and suffered human passions, with the One God, even though, unlike Neoplatonians, they had the experience of a Personal God. In addition to this, John's identification is rich in consequences. It produces a significant paradigm break, essential in understanding *the Greek idea of the Logos*. The paradigm break is from the Greek standpoint because it changes the perspective of the relations between the absolute and the relative, sensitive and intelligible, time and eternity. Using a notion such as *logos* raised problems for the new Christian horizon if it were to be used in a *conceptual* meaning. Conceptual thinking represented the spectacular leap that Greek philosophy operated inside language. The need for such a re-signification of words came from the need to clarify specific meanings that no longer depended immediately on the sensitive but on what was considered exclusively intelligible. This becomes obvious in the discourse modalities of the first dogmatic outlines of Christianity, and especially in the texts of the 4th century Fathers from Cappadocia. Even a simple observation of the acceptances acquired by this de-conceptualized notion of *Logos*, between the horizon of the Scriptures and that of patristic writings, features another type of fine-tuning.

Understanding the world's rationality suffers a significant modification, but not just one connected to understanding the role of the terms (especially those set by Greek philosophy) in expressing a reality beyond words. Since the world was created via *Logos*, it contains the seeds of reason, some *reasons for creation*, and reasons that cannot be reached simultaneously. This is why one can talk about *progress* in knowledge as *experience*. This is also why that spectacular formulation in John's prologue and the whole content of the Scriptural Revelation could be understood only by going through a personal experience as personal fulfillment of the Scriptures. Experiment is what offers the criteria for the understanding of another meaning of rationality. The objective-subjective dilemma in understanding what characterizes the Logos was overcome in a way that previous discourses in the Greek and Hebrew horizon could not have anticipated. And this understanding, which goes beyond the fixed frames of the concept and the conceivable, was the result of the deepened existential-concrete experience that was crystallized in the Tradition of the Christian East. The texts by St. Maxim the Confessor hold a special place when the eternal rationalities of things comprised of divine Logos are invoked; they are understood as ever higher meanings hidden in them. This perspective is expressed in the framework of the *Person*. It all emerges from man's interaction with the world, whose consequences mean a change on either side. This is why, when discussing science, one must consider human data and aim for more than

psychologically measurable subjectivity. Our times beg for this change of vision, as data offered by fundamental research cannot be interpreted and understood from the classical paradigm of science. The universe cannot be described as an objective reality whose existence is guaranteed and maintained by constant parameters, nor can humans be understood via an anthropological model that would assert their stable essence. The Christian East's rationality, as epitomized in the works of Maxim the Confessor, implies a plasticity of existence that must always be considered without omitting the Person's data. What humans do entails consequences such as their ability to better master and manipulate reality, following progress in knowledge.

The current state of scientific research and technological applications gave the prospect of improving human nature higher credibility. Both advances in genetics and artificial intelligence are concerned. The transcendence aimed at transhumanism seeks a leap and discontinuity from human nature as it is now. Clearly, throughout the history of European philosophy of past centuries, scenarios of overcoming human nature towards super-human have constantly emerged. The current technological stage takes this recurring theme from 'above' to 'trans,' but the essential feature of the paradigm shows the same goals it has had since the Renaissance. In this recurring thesis of the super-human, a crucial aspect was the radically enhanced ability of knowledge yet, no less, of *perception*. Super-man can know *differently* but can also *perceive* differently.

A debate on the existence/possibility of spiritual perception should start by asserting that the existence of spiritual senses is different from bodily ones. A few aspects are to be clarified: if spiritual senses exist, are they active continuously or in exceptional instances? What relationship is there between spiritual senses and bodily ones? Do they duplicate them, interfering in any way? If spiritual senses are activated only in certain situations, what are the effects on the body?

On the other hand, evaluating the paradigms under which the understanding of spiritual perception has stood should consider several matters. Among these: How does the act of spiritual perception manifest? Does it belong to conscious and volitional activity, or is it instead a passive process? What facilitates the act of spiritual perception? Is spiritual perception a conscious or unconscious act? If it is a conscious act, to what extent? What is the role of spiritual practice in gaining spiritual perception?

The possibility and meaning of spiritual perception were approached differently from the Patristic perspective. At least two fundamental aspects were dissimilar in the patristic paradigm of spiritual perception: it cannot be an exclusive result of human initiative, and, secondly, spiritual

experience does not aim at identification with its source, as being an ontological difference between the subject and the object of this experience. Patristic anthropology describes humans under the person-paradigm, which implies a different understanding of the soul-body relationship and the body's role in spiritual experience. The person is body *and* soul, not essentially just soul, so if the existence of spiritual senses is affirmed, it must be done together with those of the body. In this anthropological paradigm, there can be no diminution or reduction of the role of perception coming from the bodily senses about the spiritual ones. It cannot be just a spiritual perception that leaves aside or annuls what comes from the body's senses. So, the fundamental aspect that had to be expressed in the patristic tradition was the relationship between the bodily and spiritual senses in the act of spiritual experience. There have been several approaches to the parallelism issue between the two sources of perception. The differences in perspective of the relationship between the spiritual and bodily senses, as well as the question of the existence of different modes of perception depending on its source, constituted an essential sign of the implicit anthropologies present in two great horizons of spiritual practice: Greek-Byzantine and Syriac.

In the Greek-language Patristic tradition, the most eloquent approach is that of Maximus the Confessor, for whom the *soul* is not a distinct, separate entity with autonomous activity since it cannot be understood otherwise than together with the body, but with which it does not mix and or confused. The bodily existence of humans is not seen as a sign of the fall and imperfection, for the soul and body were given to cross the gap and the interval that separates/man from the purpose of his/her earthly existence. Maximus describes the essential aspect of human rational propensity, thus distinguishing between two kinds of will. If *the natural will* is proper to human nature, the gnostic will is proper to the personhood level of humans (*hypostatic*). In this register, the anthropological model implied by Maximus is evident: there is a parallelism between the bodily and the spiritual senses, each of which has its distinct activities.

However, this distinction aims to express the most crucial aspect of Maximus` doctrine, the concept of *mediation*. Wo/Man's purpose is to unify the created reality and then unify it with its Creator. This purpose is fulfilled by overcoming and unifying several polarities, such as those between created and uncreated nature, between sensible and intelligible beings, between earth and sky, or between man and woman. It is further asserted that wo/man is not only composed of soul and body but also various distinct `parts` and powers or faculties, being in a fallen state, that can and should be restored.

This anthropological perspective, focused on the acts of restoration and mediation, expresses an ever-reiterated pattern at the Greek patristic authors, in which the theme of cosmic rationality and harmony is a reiterated assumption. Mediation and unification preserve the

polarities, bringing them into a higher harmony and order, the one lost through the fall caused by original sin. Mediation cannot absorb, diminish, or annihilate bodily senses. As a laboratory of creation, man brings both sources of perception into play. Otherwise, the unification process through *the gnostic will* would not be possible. Though they have distinctive aims, the intelligible and the sensible are naturally related to each other through an indissoluble power that binds them together. Maximus describes three natural and interrelated movements of the self. This noetic arrangement entails three modalities of knowing: according to intellect or mind (*nous*), according to discursive reason (*logos*), and according to sense-perception (aesthesis). Though each one has its natural motion, the unifying movement of these modalities is the reintegration of the self. Hence, the faculties of sense and reason are correlated and interrelated by the mind, the spiritual subject with the indissoluble power to unite them.

Gregory Palamas' perspective on spiritual perception is critical due to the role played in establishing the frameworks of spiritual practice in the European East, no less being a mark of the Eastern European cultural horizon. The Palamite paradigm of understanding spiritual perception involves a series of assumptions that have become benchmarks in assessing human reality and ultimate reality. Spiritual practices in Eastern Europe were done according to the guidelines given by the Palamite Hesychasm: the possibility of attaining spiritual perception was not doubted, and its acquisition was seen as a corollary of well-guided and oriented practice. Skepticism about the possibility of genuine spiritual perception does not exist in this tradition. The Palamite paradigm of spiritual perception was the formula that no longer represented a topic of controversy after the fourteenth century. *More-than-human* is the goal of spiritual practice in the Christian East, but one to be achieved not by improving humans through technologies but still involving the body and the senses. That's why the corpus of writings compiled under *Philokalia* succeeded in the post-Byzantine Christian East. Gregory Palamas acknowledged that divine energies could only be known through experience, so the Palamite paradigm of spiritual perception also gave specific spiritual practice criteria; it became a *path*. The path of the milestones to be followed in acquiring spiritual perception implies practical experimentation involving attempts, returns, failures, and resumptions. The spiritual experience is under the sign of possibility

What spiritual perception is and how it can be attained was a constant quest, starting from Plotinus and reiterated in every major epoch since then. I am invoking significant views on spiritual perception here, each of which has a considerable impact. These pathways were integrated into the spiritual guidance across Christianity yet had distinct expressions due to the cultural horizons and

historical contexts. This is a strong point in arguing that human potentiality is so complex, a striking fact in the spiritual practices aiming at transcendent kinds of perception, so they cannot be reduced to any technical/scientific approach, no matter how advanced. Yes, humans can and should be enhanced, but by what? The promise made by transhumanism is limited when compared to the scope of spiritual practice.